

[cover](#)

[listings](#)

[humor](#)

[news](#)

[movies](#)

[music](#)

[arts &  
entertainment](#)

[dining](#)

[classifieds](#)

[personals](#)

[mediakit](#)

[home](#)

## Special Sections

CEA 2003



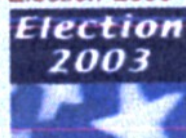
Best of Cincinnati



Dining Guide



Election 2003



volume 7, issue 34; Jul. 12-Jul. 18, 2001

Search:

Recent Issues:

[Issue 33](#)

[Issue 32](#)

[Issue 31](#)

## Fantastic Voyage

*From Norwood to East Price Hill, from living room couch to attic museum, Tim Lucas has made a life out of his obsession with horror/fantasy films*

**By Steve Ramos**

Thirty years have passed since Tim Lucas last looked inside the building that once housed Niesner's five-and-dime store on Montgomery Road in Norwood. He hasn't been back to Norwood at all in close to 20 years, despite the fact that he and his wife, Donna, live not that far away in East Price Hill.

There were few reasons for visiting his boyhood home after Lucas moved to Cincinnati's west side. Most of his relatives, an uncle and grandmother, are long dead.

But Lucas, 45, reminisces about Norwood constantly. He remembers being hit by a car outside his mother's apartment at age 9. He thinks about the "monster lady" he saw when he was 12, watching him from the second-floor apartment above his bedroom.

Most of all, he retraces the day when Mike, his best friend from high school, killed himself.

Lucas invokes his Norwood childhood frequently when he writes. The dark memories match well with his work.



By Jon Hughes

**Video Watchdog co-publisher  
and co-founder Tim Lucas**



He's written about horror and fantasy films since age 15. He's been published in various magazines like *Film Comment*, *Fangoria*, *Gorezone* and *Cinefantastique*. He writes liner notes for horror DVD releases. And he published an erotic novel, *Throat Sprockets*.

But the turning point in Lucas' writing career took place in 1990, when he and Donna became the co-publishers and co-founders of *Video Watchdog*, a magazine self-described as "The Perfectionist's Guide to Fantastic Video." It was inspired by a video review column Lucas first ran in a publication called *Video Times*. A short-lived TV version of the column was created for the VHS magazine *Overview*.

Most people have never heard of *Video Watchdog*. But its loyal following of 7,000 readers swear by the magazine's intelligent writing and in-depth video, book and soundtrack reviews of fantasy/fantastic art -- from *Black Sunday* and *Suspiria* to *The Exorcist* and *X-Men*.

Lucas has carved a niche for himself and the magazine by celebrating the artistry in films often disregarded by others as trash. An editorial in the inaugural issue helps define its mission: "Why devote a consumer-oriented guide exclusively to fantastic video? The answer is simple. This genre gave birth to motion pictures, yet no other kind of motion picture is so consistently subjected to the slings and arrows of outrageous editorial meddling: horror films in particular. Foreign horror films, even more particularly."

There's no holding back Lucas' memories of Norwood. It's why, after a number of interviews, he and I visit the landmarks of his boyhood, where he first felt the spark to become a writer who reviews fantasy movies. His pulp fixation continues to this day.

Lucas has the type of career that would make many teen-age boys jealous. Maybe that's why he looks so boyish, with thick brown hair, a round face and a rounder body.

He spends the bulk of his days and nights watching horror and fantasy films in his cluttered living room. Upstairs, in adjacent second-floor offices, he and Donna put together the monthly issues of *Video Watchdog*. She handles the magazine's layout and design; he assigns stories to various contributors, writes, edits and compiles research.

The work is intentionally reclusive, confined to the four walls of his home. But today, on this warm summer afternoon, Lucas and I head to Norwood in search of that boyhood spark.

### **Going Home Again**

Across from Norwood High School, the apartment building at 2000-2001 Elm Ave., where Lucas and his mother once lived, looks just as he remembers it. The only changes are an additional layer of dirt covering the building's yellow bricks and a "No Trespassing" sign hanging in the window that used to be his bedroom.

A lack of money forced Lucas and his mother to move frequently from apartment to apartment during his childhood. But their universe was mostly confined to a six-block radius in central Norwood.

Walking down Elm Avenue, rounding the corner at Montgomery Road, Lucas experiences his own jolt of *Twilight Zone*-type nostalgia. Niesner's, the place where he bought his beloved comic books, is now a vacant storefront; only the tile floors and brightly painted walls remain.

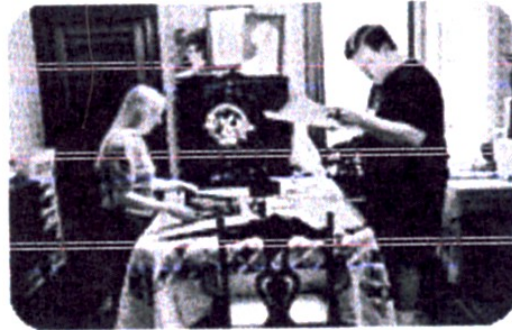


Across the street, a modern office building stands in the former location of the Plaza Theater. It's here that Lucas first fell in love with the movies.

In 1959, his grandmother took him to the Plaza to see *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. But the sight of a minuscule man fighting a giant spider proved too much for the then 3-year-old Lucas, who ran from the theater screaming and refused to watch the rest of the movie.

There were late-night horror movies on Channel 19's *Scream-In with The Cool Ghoul* and weekend trips to the drive-in with his mother. Still, watching movies at the Plaza continued to be Lucas' passion.

He remembers all the movies he watched there with encyclopedic accuracy: *Revenge of the Creature*, *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*, *Five Million Years to Earth* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. One double-bill holds special significance -- when he went to see Elvis Presley in *Charro!* and ended up watching Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* instead.



By Jon Hughes

**In their East Price Hill home, Tim and Donna Lucas put the finishing touches on another issue of *Video Watchdog*.**

"The Plaza was not some downtown movie palace," Lucas says, trying to figure out the exact spot where the Plaza stood. "It was really just a small neighborhood theater. But to me, it was a magical place."

A brief flashback to the Plaza is all it takes to unleash Lucas' moviemade memories. He starts talking about *Once Upon a Time in the West* and its Ennio Morricone score. He thinks back to Henry Fonda's chilling performance as the film's ruthless villain. He's forgotten very little.

It's not that Lucas simply enjoyed going to the movies: It was a passion -- the same passion that keeps him awake in the middle of the night as he reviews DVDs of long-forgotten horror movies for *Video Watchdog*.

The Plaza Theater eventually closed in 1971, but Lucas' memories continue to have an impact. Without the theater, it's hard to say what he'd be doing today.

### **House of Horrors**

Past the tangle of concrete and metal bridges that connect Price Hill with downtown Cincinnati, beyond the hilltop views from Mount Echo Park, *Video Watchdog* comes to life inside a non-descript A-frame house on a street that's seen better days.

Lucas' house is more office than home sweet home. Actually, over the past 11 years, the magazine's headquarters has become something akin to a movie memorabilia store. Every room in the house is cluttered with piles of DVDs, videotapes and Lucas' monster-movie mementos. Its front entry has a large rack holding back issues of *Video Watchdog*.



The living room where Lucas watches DVDs has the eerie look of a magician's lair. The shades are permanently drawn. Antique tables and a worn sofa share space with a large TV and the requisite stack of electronics.

There are numerous DVD players and VCRs. A laserdisc player sits to one side. Lucas even has an old Sony Betamax so he can watch movies he taped from television years ago.

A collection of Italian movie posters decorate one wall. Bookcases filled with CDs cover another. Monster models, dolls and movie-related kitsch are grouped above the TV.

Of course, Lucas has an endless supply of viewing material. VHS tapes are grouped to the right. Boxes of DVDs are situated to the left. He sits comfortably in the middle. At his disposal are the latest blockbuster releases, obscure horror titles and European editions of popular Hollywood movies. Lately, he's been watching titles from the Stanley Kubrick collection, the cult British comedy *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* and old Douglas Sirk melodramas.

Lucas' guiding rule for choosing which video releases to review has never changed. To him, "fantastic" films are movies that are executed with noticeable imagination. He's clear on the fact that *Video Watchdog* covers movies outside the horror and fantasy genres.

Except for the regular visits of delivery trucks, nothing on the outside of Lucas' home would ever hint at the unique goings-on behind the front door. He stopped throwing away old copies of *Video Watchdog* in the trash cans outside his house after neighborhood kids took to selling them in the streets.

His life is intentionally reclusive. He doesn't drive a car. It's been years since he's taken a bus downtown. He doesn't even go to the movies anymore.

His *Watchdog* life is comprised of his all-night screening marathons. He sleeps until mid-day. After a late breakfast, he spends the rest of the day writing in his second-floor office.

When he's not busy trying to meet *Video Watchdog's* monthly deadlines, Lucas continues working on his biography of Italian horror director Mario Bava. He's been writing the book over the past seven years, and he hopes it'll be an undisputed epic.

### **Crash**

If there was a moment when Lucas felt the chill of death he's often seen imitated in movies, it's when a car slammed into him at the corner of Elm and Section Avenues in Norwood.

He was crossing the street to get to the corner grocer. He never saw the car coming. The car's driver didn't see Lucas either.

The impact of the collision flipped Lucas under the car. Its tire squealed to a stop just inches from his head. Any closer, and Lucas certainly would have been killed.



His mother arrived at the accident scene instantly. Later, while Lucas was recovering from his injuries, she would tell him that she had a premonition that an accident was going to happen.

"It was as if my mother knew something was going to happen," Lucas says. "But all I remember is lying in the street, while people kept telling me how lucky I was to be alive."

His brush with death was fated to be.

### **Mondo Trasho**

Lucas has created a magazine devoted to all obscure titles he remembers watching at the Plaza Theater and Norwood's Twin Drive-In. Within its 80 pages, one can find extensive reviews of pulpy movies like *Ghidrah*, *The Three Headed Monster* (1964) and *Rape of the Vampire* (1967).



*Video Watchdog* has always been printed in a pocket-size format that mirrors the shape of *Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide*. Lucas says the main inspiration for the size was Donna's sewing machine manual. After placing a makeshift cover on the manual, he says, they knew they'd found their match.

Little has changed with *Video Watchdog* over the past 11 years. The covers switched from black-and-white to color with issue No. 13 in 1992. Videotape and book reviews were complemented with laserdisc reviews by No. 10. Soundtrack CD reviews became part of the editorial mix by No. 22. DVD reviews joined the canon in No. 42.

The response to *Video Watchdog* was immediate and enthusiastic. The magazine won the Best Semi Pro Zine award at the First FANEX in 1991. By the following year, Donna was able to quit her day job and focus on managing the magazine's business side.

*Video Watchdog* continues to be the couple's sole source of income -- along with a collection of reviews they self-published as *The Video Watchdog Book*. While the publishing venture hasn't made Tim and Donna Lucas rich, it's successful enough to pay all their bills. There's enough revenue for Tim to earn a \$200 monthly allowance, something he spends on Mario Bava souvenirs for his book.

It's not a lot, but the *Watchdog* empire is all their own. Tim and Donna enjoy full creative autonomy. They're their own bosses.

Whenever someone broaches the idea of selling *Video Watchdog*, Lucas says that he couldn't bear to share control. It's his child, and you can't just hand one's child over to somebody else.

"It's important that we maintain creative autonomy over the magazine," he says. "I've thought about how I would feel if I sold it. Personally, I think we'd fold it before handing it over to somebody."

### **Monster Squad**

Whenever Lucas communicates with his regular contributors -- the *Video Watchdog* Kennel, he calls them -- he emphasizes a set of guidelines that are a freelance writer's dream. There are no word counts for *Video Watchdog* copy. Time is made available for



unrestricted research. Assignments are based on the contributing writers' particular interests.

Writing for *Video Watchdog* is supposed to be writing about something you love. More importantly, no subject is too obscure for the magazine's pages. If a critic wants to review the release of Russian fairy tale films by Aleksandr Ptushko, Lucas is more than happy to make space in an upcoming issue.

*Watchdog* reviews are detailed in their analysis of a video's content. They'll compare full-screen and wide-screen versions of the same release. Aspect ratios are discussed in detail.

A *Watchdog* critic is one who balances discussion of the plot with analysis of the video transfer. It makes for a fan-friendly review that's both technical and entertaining.

Throughout the magazine's publishing history, the emphasis has been on obscure trash. A review of an Indonesian horror film like *The Hungry Snake Woman* is paired with an Italian black-and-white giallo like *Nights of Violence* (*La Notti Della Violenta*).

Italian directors like Bava, Lucio Fulci and Dario Argento enjoy extended features. Cultish filmmakers like David Cronenberg, George Romero and David Lynch get lavish coverage. No details are left unturned. When Lucas reviews the recent release of *The Playgirls and the Vampire*, a good deal of the review discusses the film's score by Aldo Piga.

Flipping through a stack of *Video Watchdogs* gives one the impression that there are never enough straight-razor murders. There's always something new you can learn about cult actress Catherine Coulson, the woman who played the "Log Lady" in *Twin Peaks*.

Basically, *Video Watchdog* is the magazine of choice for people who obsess over Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* films and H.P. Lovecraft's writing.

### **The Girl Next Door**

Back in Norwood, Lucas takes me to a large home around the corner from his old apartment building. We stand on Maple Avenue, where he starts talking about Charlotte, his first girlfriend.

The catch was that she didn't know Lucas was her boyfriend. Lucas never had the nerve to ask Charlotte on a date to the Plaza Theater. He never told her how he felt.

As a young teen-ager, Lucas was the unofficial school outcast. He was an unpopular combination of roly-poly, poor and nerdy. A group of neighborhood boys made him their favorite target. Getting beaten up became a daily occurrence. Movies and comic books served as a necessary diversion.

So Lucas would follow Charlotte home every day, waiking a few steps behind her on the opposite side of the street. It's safe



By Jon Hughes

**Donna Lucas takes a break from the magazine to work on a new quilt.**



to say she never noticed him. He was the type of **boy** pretty girls found easy to ignore.

But Lucas has never forgotten Charlotte. Now, ~~some~~ **35** years later, he stands on the sidewalk outside what was once her family's house and declares her the prettiest brunette he's ever known.

~~It doesn't matter what Charlotte looks like today. It doesn't even matter what she's doing.~~ Lucas still has his memories of the pretty girl he watched from across the street.

As a young boy, Lucas believed that love was meant to be unrequited. Happiness was something that took place inside a movie theater.

### **The Fan**

A few weeks later, I catch up with Lucas at his East Price Hill home. The deadlines for the upcoming magazine are looming heavily. He's feeling the pressure.

His challenge is to still find time to work on his Mario Bava book. He's promised *Video Watchdog* readers the book will be out sometime this fall.

At the very latest, Lucas says he wants the book ready by Christmas, but each passing week puts his goal in deeper jeopardy. Recently, a computer virus damaged the book's manuscript. There are times when it looks like his epic will never see the light of day.

But Lucas always finds time to talk about movies. He's the ultimate fan, wearing a movie-related T-shirt, plaid shorts and tennis shoes. He's also the ultimate version of the couch potato, making a living by watching movies in his living room.

Lucas is the type of fan who watches an Italian horror film like *Demons* (directed by Lamberto Bava, son of Mario Bava) and recognizes the boy actor Giovanna Frezza, from Lucio Fulci's *House by the Cemetery* and Lamberto Bava's *A Blade in the Dark*.

He pointed out subliminal images of the devil in *The Exorcist* long before its director admitted to putting them in the film. He speaks intelligently about Mexican horror films. He remembers details from the forgotten 1959 U.S./Japanese co-production *The Manster*, in which terror strikes after a monstrous head sprouts from a man's shoulder. While most people would laugh at the film, Lucas speaks about it reverently.

"I was watching some DVD releases of these Douglas Sirk movies," he says, sitting in his living room. "I'd never seen them before and I really liked them. I remember these were the types of movies my mom used to watch and now, I also appreciate them.

"But I was struck by something I read in the liner notes. There's a unity of trash and art in Sirk's melodramas. That's what I see *Video Watchdog* doing. We celebrate the art that lies within these movies other people deride as trash."

### **Bride of the Monster**

Lucas was 12 when he saw the monster lady above his apartment. It would be the only time he would come face-to-face with a creature worthy of some Hammer horror movie.



It was a humid summer night, and Lucas was having problems staying asleep. The street outside his window was still. Everything was unusually quiet. In his mind, it was the perfect time to do something busy like wash his mother's car.

The car was parked alongside the curb, so Lucas had to carry buckets of water from the spigot on the side of the apartment building.

Near dawn, before any neighbors were awake, Lucas glanced at the second-floor window and almost screamed. An old woman stared down at him. A large ridge of protruding bone snaked across her forehead. The flesh around her face sagged to her shoulders. Her eyes were dark and hollow. She was the bride of Frankenstein, a dummy made of melting wax.

Lucas was too frightened to speak, but as soon as their eyes met the monster lady slipped away. Later, his mother explained how the woman who lived above them kept her deformed sister hidden away in her apartment. There was a normal explanation.



By Jon Hughes

But Lucas remembers things differently. In the mind of a 12-year-old, he'd encountered a real monster.

**Tim Lucas' mother, Juanita Bowman, helps prepare the latest Video Watchdog for shipping.**

### **Death in Norwood**

In *Video Watchdog* No. 50, Lucas explains to his readers the source of his morbid curiosity: "My grandfather died before he was 30; my father died before he was 35, and before I was born. The absence of a father, or rather the awareness of a dead father, probably made me conscious of mortality at an earlier age than most children are, and the fact that I was born on May 30, a date celebrated throughout my childhood as Memorial Day, surely did something to double that awareness."

Lucas' fixation turned personal in 1972 when his best friend Mike killed himself at age 14. Lucas refused to accept his friend's death. After hearing the news, he still went to review *A Clockwork Orange* for the high school newspaper. Only upon his return home did he finally accept that his friend was dead.

Lucas never saw his friend's suicide coming. He never had the chance to talk him out of it. More importantly, he never told Mike how much he meant to him.

The apartment where Mike used to live still stands across the street from the high school. The fire escapes where Lucas and Mike would sit and read comic books are also there.

After Mike's death, Lucas retreated from high school. He submitted a review to *Cinefantastique*, whose Winter 1972 issue published his first professional review at age 15. Soon after, he left home when his mother remarried.

Lucas never gave up on his dream to become a professional writer.



He shared apartments with friends. He honed his writing skills at local weekly newspapers like *The Queen's Jester* and *Rivertown Times*.

Love entered Lucas' life during a double feature of *Theatre of Blood* and *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* at the RKO Albee Theater downtown. Donna Goldschmidt was the cashier, and Lucas knew he'd met his soulmate.

Lucas didn't have much money, but he knew he wanted to be with Donna. Months later, outside the Imperial Theater in Over-the-Rhine, he finally told someone how much they meant to him. For once he understood that love could be found outside the movie theater, albeit just under a marquee.

"Where else would I meet someone?" Lucas says, laughing. "If I didn't meet her at a movie theater, I would have to do something crazy like go to her house and ring a doorbell."

They got married 18 months later and celebrated alone by watching a showing of *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein*. Lucas would consider that moment his most fateful day in a life filled with fateful days.

### **Written on the Wind**

If there are any doubts whether Lucas connects with his *Video Watchdog* fans, all one has to do is look at the magazine's letterbox. Each inquiry acts as a dialogue between Lucas and his readers. An extensive "editor's response" follows every letter, resulting in a format that borders on conversation.

Lucas says confidently that he knows what *Watchdog* readers want out of the magazine. It's clear from the letters that the magazine's fans have the utmost respect for Lucas and his work. It appears that it's one of those rare win/win situations that keep everyone happy.

But Lucas says he doesn't plan to edit *Video Watchdog* for the rest of his life. He has other dreams and goals. Writing an uncredited draft of *The Naked Lunch* for David Cronenberg convinced Lucas to stick with literature.

What Lucas really wants to do is write more novels like his 1994 thriller *Throat Sprockets*. He has other drafts to show publishers. His hope is that his Mario Bava book might open some doors.

As a teen-ager, Lucas never would have imagined that someday he'd be publishing an acclaimed magazine about horror and fantasy movies. Today, when it comes to being a full-time novelist, he's not ready to jettison his dreams.

"I consider *Video Watchdog* another step in my journey," he says. "I never considered it to be the last thing I was going to do. I want to write fiction. That's what I always wanted to do. Hopefully, *Video Watchdog* will help me do it."

### **Haunted Attic**

Upstairs in his attic, Lucas sidesteps his way through a life's worth of mementos. There are statues of the Frisch's Big Boy and boxes of monster magazines and comic books.

Lucas is one of those guys who hates to throw anything out. More than 2,000 videotapes line a series of shelves. If needed, he can watch everything he's ever recorded off television. Books are piled



atop a chair he once used for reading.

The attic was once empty. Now it's difficult to step without tripping over a box.

By chance, Lucas has created the *Video Watchdog* museum complete with a souvenir coin from the movie *Zotz!* and a Frankenstein monster model kit called Big Frankie. He built the model in 1968 after he and his mother moved back to Norwood after a year living in Cincinnati's housing projects. He refuses to throw it away.

So many things that have meant so much to Lucas are no longer around. The Plaza Theater is gone. The Albee, where Lucas first met Donna, is gone. Only the Imperial remains, though it's a ghost of its former self.

Someday, if Lucas achieves his dreams of becoming a novelist, *Video Watchdog* will also be a thing of the past. Of course, he'll always have his attic museum. He'll always have Big Frankie.

There are some things that should never be taken away. ©

**E-mail [Steve Ramos](#)**

[Back to Top](#)

---

### **Previously in Cover Story**

#### **[All the News That Causes Fits](#)**

**By Gabriel Roth** (July 5, 2001)

#### **[The Runners-Up](#)**

(July 5, 2001)

#### **[Project Censored 2000 National Judges](#)**

(July 5, 2001)

**[more...](#)**

---

### **Other articles by Steve Ramos**

**[Public Enemy](#)** (July 5, 2001)

**[Don't Call Me Gandhi](#)** (July 5, 2001)

**[Couch Potato](#)** (July 5, 2001)

**[more...](#)**

---

[personals](#) | [cover](#) | [listings](#) | [humor](#) | [news](#) | [movies](#) | [music](#) | [arts & entertainment](#)  
| [dining](#) | [classifieds](#) | [mediakit](#) | [home](#)

Cincinnati CityBeat covers news, public issues, arts and entertainment of interest to readers in Greater Cincinnati. The views expressed in these pages do not necessarily represent those of the publisher, 2001 Lightborne Publishing Inc. and may not be reprinted in whole or in part without prior written permission. Unsolicited editorial or graphic material is welcome to be submitted but can only be returned if accompanied by a stamped envelope. Unsolicited material accepted for publication is subject to CityBeat's right to edit and use as it sees fit.